

MEETING NOTES

PRESENT: See Annexe 1

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Richard Lane welcomed members of the Steering Committee. The objective of the meeting was to evaluate the key points from the Brussels Conference that would impact on SciColl's next steps and to prepare for the next GSF meeting.

2. KEY POINTS FROM THE BRUSSELS CONFERENCE AND THE IMPACT ON THE NEXT STEPS FOR SCICOLL

The key points arising from the Conference were:

- Focus of SciColl
- Quality assurance of specimens and samples for research purposes
- Deliverables after three years – what are these?
- Digitising
- Demonstrator Projects
- Lack of recognition for scientists putting data in the public domain.
- Evaluation – how will SciColl be assessed – what does success look like?
- Accessibility – international protocol for access
- What is the driving force for researchers to use SciColl.

Focus of SciColl:

It is very important that SciColl maintains a sharp focus and is specific about what it is trying to achieve. In this context, SciColl should not be over ambitious by trying to do too much. During the course of the Conference the point was made several times that SciColl is a facilitating entity whose aim it is to increase access to collections (it is not about doing research). The following comments were made:

- SciColl should be multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary, using existing collections to answer contemporary scientific questions. This could be of particular relevance to government and policy makers.
- SciColl is not confined to natural history – the enthusiasm of the natural history faction could be harmful to the progress of SciColl as the initiative could be confused with initiatives such as GBIF etc. We should be ever mindful that natural history museums are not just about biodiversity (they include much geology and extraterrestrial material, as well as anthropology and human prehistory).
- The added benefit of SciColl to existing organisations needs to be clearly defined.
- Keep the focus on natural science objects (including human beings); how the natural world works rather than technological advances.

Quality Assurance of specimens and samples for research purposes: What role SciColl could have for quality assurance?

Many felt that there was some confusion over the interpretation of “quality”.

- We need to be more precise in articulating what a collection consists of, the conditions under which it was collected and then stored. “Quality” is related to a project/subject area.
- Finding a common language. There was a very clear message from the working groups relating to the ability to describe collections “*in other people’s terms*”. SciColl could help formulate a relationship between researchers and collections by providing guidance that would help collections describe what they hold in a form that is accessible to different groups of researchers. Bringing together disparate groups is a key role.
- There is some ignorance over what collections can be used for. SciColl could adopt the “US Green Book”^① model and show other users what is possible through case studies.

What are the deliverables after three years?

- The proposal was made that SciColl develops a “clearing house” mechanism to all information on collections, but building such a facility would require substantial financial and staff resources etc. However, a central point where metadata could be obtained (like the Korea resource information centre) was more feasible and could be a major deliverable. There is a difference between building a portal and bringing the information together.
- There is a clear demand for knowing what exists in collections and where these collections are held. SciColl could become the interface between researchers and collections and in this context may develop finding tools.
- Part of those finding tools will involve ontologies which are appropriate to different areas of research. Adopting the “Yellow Pages” approach (i.e. providing raw data with some form of editing and harmonisation) would provide a value-added benefit to collections and build on recent work on “collection level descriptions”..
- The question remains “*how do you get a critical mass of collections registered for researchers to exploit?*” Suggestions included:
 - Follow the same model as the Encyclopedia of Life (EoL) - providing free access in the early stages of its development as a way to populate the database. Small fees could then be charged as demand increases.
 - Ability to advertise own collections on the *Yellow Pages* could act as an enticement.
 - Forming a strategic alliance with existing organisation.

Digitising:

The Steering Committee felt that digitising collections is not part of SciColl’s mission; SciColl should not duplicate existing initiatives. Digitising should be science driven - derivative data is not SciColl business but how to access raw data is. Digitising collections greatly improves access, but one of the key roles of SciColl is putting researchers in touch with original materials (specimens and samples) that could be analysed with new technology or in new combinations. It is difficult to predict how digital surrogates will be used for interdisciplinary research. Specific examples, such as digitising nomenclatural types for use by biological taxonomists is a specialised activity best driven by the taxonomic community and natural history museums. SciColl could disseminate information on digitising projects, together with the processes, (e.g. the Herbarium at the Museum Nationale d’Histoire Naturelle, Paris).

^① National Science and Technology Council Committee on Science Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections. 2009. Scientific Collections: Mission-Critical Infrastructure for Federal Agencies. Office of Science and Technology Policy, Washington, D.C. 47 pp

Demonstrator Projects: What pilot project should we do?

The role of SciColl is to stimulate interdisciplinary research that relies on access to scientific collections and their associated information. To ensure that SciColl delivers on this mission a project has been identified - the “*Environmental Change since the Dawn of Humanity*” (or “*timeline*” project). Should SciColl pursue one core project or modular projects?

- The “*timeline*” approach is a good idea but the general view is that it needs refinement, which could be included as part of the programme of work where ideas could be stimulated. An exploratory workshop to work through the case studies was proposed.
- The *timeline* project has strong support, but other potential projects should be developed (e.g. emerging diseases).
- The science-driven agenda is of interest for the broader political stakeholders. Kicking off with an exciting research project would demonstrate that SciColl is more than just a number of networking organisations working together.
- SciColl’s remit is not to set universal standards, centralise or set mandates for organisations, but to ensure that data are available to engender interoperability.
- Companies with ontology expertise could be interested in working with SciColl a *quid pro quo* basis (i.e. they could provide funding, SciColl could provide the raw data).

Lack of recognition for individual scientists putting data in the public domain. Could SciColl do anything about this?

Other organisations are more suited to lobbying for better recognition (e.g. national academics). This would be too difficult for SciColl and could conflict with what other organisations are doing. Influencing regulatory environments (e.g. how specimens are sent throughout the world) is not something that SciColl can do either. The Secretariat could act as an information dissemination centre providing information rather than becoming a lobbying body for change.

How will SciColl be evaluated – what does success look like?

Would this be based on funding, collaboration, membership etc? A definition of the deliverables is needed before success can be defined. The suggestion was made that a customer satisfaction survey might be undertaken in the future. SciColl will not set standards so, therefore, will not be an ISO-type organisation.

Accessibility – international protocol for access.

It is acknowledged that not all collections will be openly accessible (e.g. private, sovereign, industrial collections etc) and the question whether SciColl should develop an international protocol for access was raised. Whilst it is not possible to change the legal environment SciColl could be active in persuading these organisations to grant access to their collections or define their conditions for access.

Cultural collections

There remains some ambiguity here, so it is important to articulate how cultural collections can contribute to SciColl. The US “*Green Book*” defines cultural collections of interest as “*any kind of object-based specimen assembled for scientific research*”. Digital data associated with objects was included.

European Science Foundation:

SciColl was encouraged to apply for ESF grants under the banner of providing an infrastructure platform, the fostering of new ideas and new areas of research etc, e.g. the Research Network Programmes (RNP). <http://www.esf.org/activities/research-networking-programmes.html>

3 GOVERNANCE:

3.1: Review proposed governance

The governance structure may have to be reviewed if the balance of institutional membership outweighs country membership.

- The proposed three year structure had presumed that governments would be the main funders. A different composition (i.e. more institutions than governments) would have an impact on the funding model and a different balance of power on the Executive Board (the balance was unquantifiable at this stage when the membership composition is unknown).
- Up to 20 Executive Board members would be acceptable in the first year as long as there was a “bureau” comprising chairs and vice chairs to direct the organisation. The interim Executive Board will comprise those countries/organisations who have signed letters of intent.

It was agreed that the structure does not need to radically change. We may wish to exercise caution in defining the number of country representatives at the beginning in case institutions outnumber national representatives. We should articulate that governance could evolve as composition evolves.

A round table “straw pole” was conducted to assess potential membership:

Australia: Membership on a national level is more likely and it is doubtful whether state museums would contribute in the first initial stage. Therefore, happy to talk to government.

Germany: Sustained interest from the Federal Ministry of Research and Education. In addition, the National Science Foundation has declared an interest.

France: Ms Nechad emphasised that although the French Government support the idea of SciColl it will not give any long term financial support, as they feel the initiative is community based and not “topped down”. The Government is also concerned that SciColl may duplicate existing initiatives (it is already financing other memberships such as GBIF and LifeWatch) and also wants to see very clear value added benefits. The Government did send a delegate to Conference.

Japan: Dr. Matsuura reported that his discussions within the National Museum of Nature and Science (5 depts) had been enthusiastic and two meetings with government had taken place. Strong possibility that Japan will join SciColl (institutions will follow the government’s lead).

Italy: Dr Bartolozzi will be meeting with the Head of International Research Ministry, but warned the Committee that the Italian Government is also trying to find funds for GBIF.

Netherlands: The National Delegate at GSF is very supportive of SciColl and Dr Kreigsman is convinced that SciColl will have both country and institutional membership from the Netherlands.

Portugal: Dr Mota is unsure of his government’s commitment and also unsure of institutional support at the moment, but hopes to participate. Dr Mota reported that Portugal’s GSF delegate is very keen on project and is expecting to speak with the President of the Science Foundation.

USA: The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy is very supportive of collections so the timing is good. Conceptually a lot of support, but SciColl would stand a better chance of commitment if the initiative was presented as a three year project rather funding a Secretariat. A word of caution was not to follow the GBIF funding model. Dr Miller thinks that the Smithsonian would join SciColl and other diverse scientific collections in USA may join as consortia.

Belgium: Government very positive, but unsure of institutional support.

Norway: The Norwegian Government would likely support (as least the first stage) and Dr Mehlum thinks his institution would like to join. The four natural history collections in Norway may explore joining as a consortium.

South Africa: The Department of Science and Technology is very keen to participate.

Korea: Prof Lee indicated that the Korea National Research Resources Center will join SciColl, but is unsure whether the Korean Government will commit.

UK: It is unlikely that the UK will make a central national contribution to SciColl, but instead individual organisations will be asked to contribute. The Natural History Museum will join as an institution.

3.2: Review proposed membership agreement

The Membership Agreement is still work in progress and was not presented. This agreement is not critical for the next GSF meeting in April. The Terms of Reference and budget will be presented at the GSF meeting.

4 BUDGET:

4.1: Secretariat and additional activity costs

The highlighted error on the table was corrected. The budget remained unchanged with the following observations:

- “Programme of Work” to be changed to “Work Programme Management”.
- The Steering Committee has to remain realistic about funding opportunities and not rely on external funding for core Secretariat activities. Although applying for EU (other external) funds will be possible in the future, at the present time SciColl is not a legal entity and as such may not be eligible. Therefore, regular membership dues should be regarded as the core funding.
- Any additional funding could finance the programme of work.

4.2: Country and institutional subscriptions

Countries and institutions would be more likely to commit if the contributions were based on a fixed figure rather than a range. For this reason a median figure was taken and the contributions changed to:

Country Contributions:

Category	GERD (latest available figs)	Countries (examples)	Estimated contribution (€ p.a.)
1	> \$50 billion	USA, Japan, Germany, China	90k€
2	\$18-50 billion	Canada, France, Italy, Korea, Russia, UK	40k€
3	\$7.5-18 billion	Australia, Austria, Israel, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Chinese Taipei,	20k€
4	< \$7.5 billion	Belgium, Finland, Singapore, South Africa, Portugal, Norway, Poland,	10k€

Institutional Contributions:

Category	Operational budget [US\$]	Staff number	Scope	Institutions (examples)	Contrib € (p.a.)
1	>\$10 million	>150	Multiple disciplines, global coverage,	NHM, SI, MNHN	16k€
2	\$1 million - \$10 million	50-150	International orientation,	MfN Berlin, Naturalis,	8k€
3	\$200k - \$1 million or small consortia of up to 10 instit. <\$200k	10-50	Primarily nationally/regionally oriented institutions	INBIO, NMK, University of New Mexico	4k€
4	<\$200k	<10	Fewer disciplines, specialized collections	Linnean Society London,	2k€

The reworking eliminates the possibility that big institutions may in some cases contribute more than countries. It was also acknowledged that institutional contributions should not be decreased too much as future contributory increases would lead to resistance.

It was acknowledged that museums and similar organisations have approached their governments to fund other initiatives, e.g. GBIF and the distinctiveness of SciColl will need to be clear.

Individual Institutional Contributions:

- The point was taken that we have to be careful with the definitions used for the table, as this could lead to confusion over ranking (e.g. an international organisation could fall into category 3).
- “Staff Number” column to be deleted.
- It was difficult to understand the balance between institutional and country contributions and there appeared to be an imbalance in what benefits are derived from the level of contribution. It was accepted that the relationship between contribution and representation on the Executive Board has not been worked through fully and needs further discussion. Feedback on options is welcome.
- Agreement that a separate category be included for international or intergovernmental organisations, which are non-paying and non-voting or a nominal fee.

Dr Schindel confirmed that the NSF grant supporting this workshop could pay for the translation printing of the SciColl brochure for outreach purposes. The brochure would be translated into Arabic, Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish and possibly Korean. Interested parties are to contact Dr Schindel within one month and completion of work (i.e. printing) completed within three months.

Further consideration is needed related to regional meetings of researchers and collections and to what stage these are introduced. This would not be considered before first round of MoU signatures, but articulated in the Programme of Work.

5. TIMELINE:

5.1 Review of timeline in light of progress

The Terms of Reference and refined budget will be presented at the next meeting of the GSF on 8/9 April and needs to be submitted to the GSF in mid-March. Once the GSF has given endorsement to the final proposal, the process of issuing invitations to submit letters of intent to join SciColl can begin. It was accepted that more time is needed for this process, impacting on the timeline by moving milestones back by at least three months. Mr Sgard confirmed that the GSF Secretariat could help in this process as well as managing the call for proposals to host the SciColl Secretariat (towards the end of the year). It was reiterated that letters of intent will be signed by people who are guaranteeing the money (whether governments or institution). **Dr Hauser** to amend the timeline in light of discussion.

Distinction between free access and *gratis* access should be made in the Strategic Plan.

5.2 Next meeting: offer from Australia

SciColl had received very positive support from the Australian government representative who confirmed that funding had been secured to support an increase in Australia's participation in SciColl. In addition, Australia offered to host a workshop in 2010. Dr LaSalle (Australian delegate) confirmed that the local costs of hosting the meeting would be met but travel and subsistence costs could not be supported.

It was agreed that Dr La Salle will need to work with the Steering Committee to agree topics for the workshop, together with a time and the likely level of attendance. The anticipated timeframe would be September or November; October was discounted due to the number of other international meetings taking place during this time.

The focus would be to examine in greater depth how collections can be used to explore current scientific questions in environmental change. The timeline project and a new topic of emerging diseases (human, animal and plant diseases). 3-4 researchers interested in emerging diseases would be invited to speak at the workshop.

6. PLANS FOR ENGAGEMENT OF WIDER INSTITUTIONAL MEMBERSHIP

It is still important to use governmental connections to get wider institutional membership.

7. CLOSE

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2 March 2010
(Version 3)

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